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What determines quality in qualitative research?

Lawrence F Bailey, Chairman, Catalyst Research Ltd

Over the last year or so, and most particularly over the last six months, we have enjoyed an abundance of letters and papers intended to present authoritative assessment of what qualitative research is all about. It is striking that although these assessments are substantially at odds with one another, each author is clearly writing from an assumption, which no doubt exists at a formidably deep level, to say 'I know that I do a good job'.

But we have steered away from the challenge of finding absolutes by which to defend such fundamental self-assessment. And no wonder! From all that has been said so far, it is clear that a good job for Gerald de Groot may not be a good job for Wendy Gordon; a Mike Owen 'good job' may not be so for Mary Goodyear – and so on. The problem is that several separate groups of people are reviewing the situation from quite different perspectives; worse still, some groups are beginning to use a different language in discussing the objectives of qualitative research, or using some familiar terms to mean unfamiliar things. My aim in this discussion paper is to break down the blurred icon of quality into more manageable concepts.

Before this can be done, we must all be obliged to accept that there is such a thing as methodology in qualitative research. Assuming we set aside various extended and specialised uses of the term 'research' (the study of history and the Ugandan secret police are examples) then this point is non-negotiable. In seeking to declare that concepts such as 'reliability' and 'validity' are "inappropriate for qualitative research", Mike Owen is simply wrong, since research by definition implies the admissibility of concepts such as reliability and validity. But those whose hearts are firmly in quantitative research are also wrong to assume that these concepts can only be interpreted in the ways that are appropriate for quantitative studies. To be fair to Gerald de Groot, I cannot actually trace a quotation in which he specifically says as much, but the flavour of his recent writing is to the effect that qualitative research studies should be answerable to the same criteria as in quantitative research – namely that the findings should be replicable across researchers and within techniques. But a qualitative researcher, or a team of qualitative researchers, may very reasonably be perfectly satisfied to claim that their research findings could be replicated within researchers and (very probably) across techniques.

There is logically one other course available for the dissident qualitative researcher who is unwilling to submit at all to the use of



Lawrence F Bailey

concepts such as reliability and validity, namely to declare that, whatever he or she is doing, it is *not* research. I have in fact long felt that there is a type of qualitative researcher who would be more honest to opt out of The Market Research Society in favour of joining the Market Quick Answer Society. But, of course, that is not the only option; the position of declaring that one is not a researcher is perfectly proper. I shall return to it later.

Moving more directly into personal opinion, we seem to have heard little in the current debate of the importance of recruitment exactly to quota. Whatever the 'enabling techniques' that the researcher favours, it seems an irreproachable fundamental aim to look for good 'raw materials' in the form of appropriate respondents. It has been my pleasure and advantage, over the last ten years, to have worked alongside some very dedicated and extraordinarily effective field department staff. I have always believed that they in turn deserve quotas that really mean something. If you are not talking to the right people, your research findings will be less relevant. Again, there are good reasons, ordinarily, for recruiting inexperienced respondents in a cohesive group with no outsiders, to talk in a relaxed environment. The requirement for quality research is for the researcher to know when and, above all, why any changes from this standard approach should be made.

There is certainly a requirement for good discussion technique. In recent years all manner of special techniques have been suggested. All those projective exercises, role-playing interludes, crayon and modelling clay sessions, and so on, have their place. But research buyers have rightly become suspicious of those researchers who appear to offer a 'magic wand' technique. After all, why buy half a dozen sessions using the copyright 'Hi-Yo Silver' technique when highly skilled non-directive interviewing could extract the same quality of information in four conventional group discussions? I am all in favour of researchers being armed with the fullest possible battery of discussion techniques. And a good researcher would know when, where and why to use them.

Then again, stress has often been placed on the use of a good interpretative model. Miraculous properties have sometimes been attributed to the benefits of using transactional analysis (TA), neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), a psycho-analytical approach (Freud, Jung, etc . . .), and even some infallible source known as 'common sense'. We have among us many cases of researcher horses for interpretative courses. I have little doubt that there are some people who can take to NLP, for example, with dazzling effect. But very few clients indeed are interested in a jargon-packed debrief. The good researcher will, I think, ride his own course and render his work into findings that are succinct, clear and jargon-free.

Relatedly, some companies place enormous stress on a totally rigorous analysis of qualitative data. There is some merit in listening to all the tapes, transcribing all the discussions, constructing a content analysis, conducting an analysis by teamwork, etc. But it is a value of experience to show that an obsessive adherence to such a single, guiding analysis route can rapidly lead to diminishing returns. Mary Goodyear does indeed say many

sensible things (ref Claude R Hart), but so much of her May *Newsletter* paper is tinged with an evident nostalgia for the good old days. I cannot really believe that Mary Goodyear wants clients to buy her services as a good typist, or recruiter, or even as a person who is good at transcribing tapes. These tasks can safely be left to others who are good at them. It is important for a project to be cost-effective without loss of quality, and who could doubt that Mary Goodyear, and other senior researchers, should be saved for those parts of a project at which they uniquely excel, and be costed appropriately. This is not, of course, to say that rigour is unnecessary. But it is almost self-evident to observe that while a researcher is less likely to gain valid insight without a measure of rigour, it is very easy indeed to have rigour with producing insight.

One other determinant of quality research, that is neither controversial nor, perhaps, allotted sufficient importance, is the use of a good oral and written presentation style. A very individualistic thing. Let's have more of it.

So much for an analysis of what determines quality; but to complete the picture we need to ask a question that, perhaps, verges on the heretical. The question is whether clients actually want quality research at all? Several recent correspondents have come very close to claiming that the best research is what the client needs to hear – effectively defined a priori within tight limits. This is the commercial success metric: if it sells in high volume it must be good. The evidence is (Bailey & Scott-Jones 1984), from the research buyers themselves, that most research is commissioned to provide 'political' ammunition of one kind or another. What is important is what the researcher-consultant has to say, as a permissible contribution to the political battlefield. I am not at all sure that the term 'research' is appropriate for this activity: but we have to be brave enough to call ourselves something else.

'if you are not talking to the right people, your research findings will be less relevant'

This returns us quite nicely to the earlier suggestion that we could quite legitimately avoid these methodological anxieties by simply declaring that we are not doing research. I would be surprised to see the formation of a Market Quick Answer Society, but I see no reason why it should not be entirely proper and healthy to see the formation of The Marketing Consultants Society, within which many MRS members, currently obliged to wear 'qualitative researcher' labels, would feel much more comfortable. The rationale here will be that clients buy the service of good thinkers. These people may well use group discussions, individual interviews, or other kinds of meetings, to stimulate their 'creative juices'. Any such consultants with plenty of experience in the terminology and workings of some particular market could become very valuable indeed to clients in relevant industries. And all achieved without the individual consultant having to worry about design methodology, tape transcriptions, analysis procedures, etc, any more than he or she individually chooses!

I look forward to reading in the next *Newsletter* that the Marketing Consultants Society is open for business . . .

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